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ABSTRACT

Although Britain's Open University employs television case studies resembling the documentaries seen on general service television as part of its multimedia distance learning system, evaluations of the program have shown that many students were unable to achieve the learning objectives put forth by the program producers. Because of production pressures, there was a tendency for the program producers to concentrate on the content rather than on the learning process. Even if the producers were perfectly clear about the learning process they wanted to initiate, students also had to know what they were expected to do with the material and why. Open University is now using five approaches to help students make better use of the television case studies: (1) more extensive materials to support the television programs; (2) supplemental television programs broadcast early in the course to help students develop an analytical approach to the case study component of the course; (3) audiocassettes to follow up television case studies; (4) training packages with videotaped extracts from a range of programs, an accompanying handbook, and specially prepared exercises; and (5) restructuring the case study programs so that help for the students is included in the basic structure. More of the explanatory frameworks in which a program's version of reality was constructed should be revealed to the students. (HTH)

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JUST ONE VERSION OF REALITY:

USING TELEVISION CASE-STUDIES

IN UNIVERSITY COURSES

The British Open University uses television as part of its multi-media distance learning system and case-study programmes, resembling the documentaries of general service television, are used by many undergraduate courses. Although these television case-studies are popular with students evaluations have shown that many are unable to make full use of them - failing to experience the learning process the programme makers intended. This paper is concerned with the teaching purposes which lie behind the use of television case-studies: the difficulties students encounter when trying to achieve the learning objectives these programmes set: and ways in which case-study programmes might be structured to increase the likelihood that students will find them a valuable learning resource. It concludes that we must stop thinking of television case-studies as documentaries for a specialised audience: emphasise their status as only one construction of reality: and pay far more attention to the process through which reality is encoded by the programme makers and decoded by the students.

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In higher education television has often been used as a delivery medium through which students can be presented with lectures, demonstrations of professional skills, or scientific experiments. In all cases an increased sophistication and polish can be given to the presentation by using the production techniques television permits. The conventions, however, are of the lecture theatre, or the science laboratory and these are merely being carried by television. With case-study television programmes the situation is very different. The conventions used are taken from the television documentary and the programmes use the language of television.

This paper is concerned with the teaching purposes which lie behind the use of television case-studies; the difficulties students may encounter when trying to achieve the learning objectives these programmes set; and ways in which case-study programmes might be structured to increase the likelihood that students will find them a valuable learning resource.[1]

What is a Television Case-Study?

In a particularly confusing situation where the term case-study has been applied to a very wide range of television programmes probably the best starting point for any attempt to define them is to say that they are based on the codes and conventions of the documentary where 'realism' is stressed in material which attempts to record reality. After an analysis

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[1] For those unfamiliar with the British Open University, its teaching system, and the role of instructional media a very brief outline has been included as an appendix to this paper.

of many Open University television case-studies Bates and Gallagher (1977, p.8) offered the following broad definition.

> "Programmes described as case-studies tend to present concrete examples of behaviours - usually of people and often of machines, or man/machine systems - operating in their 'normal' context. Whereas other kinds of programme, and other components of a course - particularly the correspondence texts - tend to be analytic, abstract, and presented in a sequential or linear manner, breaking the subject matter down into general principles, case-study programmes tend to be concrete and synthetic, anchored in or drawn from the 'real world' and reflecting the interrelatedness between various concepts and the complexity of the 'real' world."

To this description of the usual content of case-studies - and their documentary style format - we should also add something about the type of learning experience these programmes attempt to provide for the student.

At the Open University the term case-study has been applied to programmes with a wide range of teaching objectives, however, two educational purposes do seem to be behind most case-study programmes. First, they give students an opportunity to observe a process, or situation drawn from the 'real world'. Second, they provide material which the students can analyse using the concepts they have met elsewhere in the course. Individual programmes vary in the sophistication of the analysis they expect students to undertake, and the amount of help and guidance they offer, but the idea that students can apply the abstract knowledge they have met elsewhere in the course to concrete, 'real world' problems and situations is a fundamental rationale behind the use of case-study television programmes. Clearly any use of television which gives students opportunities to engage in the higher order learning skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956) is particularly appropriate in higher education where these activities are usually seen as attributes

of the 'good' student.

Unfortunately evaluations of case-study programmes at the Open University (Bates and Gallagher, 1977) showed that many students were unable to achieve the learning objectives which the programme makers had set. The remainder of this paper will concern itself with trying to identify why students could not benefit fully from these programmes and how the structure of television case-studies might be improved.

The Open University Experience

Although the inability of some students to make full use of the case-study programme reflected the usual variation in ability among students Bates and Gallagher concluded that another factor in these difficulties was that the programme makers themselves were sometimes unclear about the learning process they wanted students to experience by watching the case-study. Because of production pressures there was a tendency for discussions about case-study programmes to concentrate on the content (who should be interviewed; which locations visited) rather than the learning process. Greater emphasis should be given to defining the learning process the programme is trying to initiate. Then decisions can be made about the kind of case-study which will be most likely to achieve this, and whether students will need help. For example, if familiarity with certain concepts is required - perhaps because students are to analyse the case-study material using those concepts - the programme makers must ask themselves whether an adequate level of familiarity can be assumed at that stage in the course. If there is any doubt it may be

necessary to include more guidance within the programme, or to change the structure of the course in order that students will have the required level of familiarity before viewing the programme.

Even though the programme makers may be perfectly clear about the learning process they want to initiate this is still not enough. It is crucial that the students should also be clear about this. The students must know what they are expected to do with the material and why they are doing it. Otherwise there is a danger that they will misinterpret the educational purpose of the programme. In their evaluation of one Open University case-study programme Bates and Gallagher (1977 p.12) found that the majority of students had seen the programme "..... as a source of information rather than - as was intended - a resource for the development of course skills." And they pointed out that this was a particular danger in programmes which ".....do not provide explicit cues or signposts in the programme itself to how the broadcast material relates to the general aims of the course."

At the Open University five approaches to helping students make better use of television case-studies can be identified. Four are external to the programme, the fifth considers the structure of the case-study programme itself.

1. More extensive broadcast notes. In the first attempt to help students the printed materials which support the television programmes - known in the Open University as 'broadcast notes' - became more extensive. Some courses even produced glossy 'media booklets' which included large

amounts of background material, maps, photographs, and supplementary reading. These extended broadcast 'notes' became so lengthy that in one or two courses the television broadcasts, together with the media booklet began to look like a separate course within the main course. Recently there has been a move away from this approach and a number of courses now include the broadcast notes within the main correspondence text. This demands a close integration between the concepts being covered in the correspondence text and the material in the television case-study. Which in turn has implications arising from the different production schedules for print and broadcast media. Before the correspondence text is handed over to the printers the programme must be completed in order that the broadcast notes can be included. Despite the complicated scheduling that this approach may require it can help to promote a closer integration between the print and television components of a course. Students are then more likely to see how the content of the case-study relates to the main topic of the course.

2. Supplementary television programmes. In several courses a special programme was made to help students develop an analytical approach to the television component of that course. These programmes were transmitted quite early in the course and research has shown that they can be quite successful (Bates and Gallagher, 1977 p.7). However, Bates and Gallagher, 1977 p.34) concluded that ".... although such programmes can be valuable, it would still be better to concentrate on designing case-study programmes and courses so that such programmes would be unnecessary." Support for this conclusion came from the results of an evaluation which showed that

students had found it difficult to integrate theoretical concepts with the original case-study programme material even when a follow-up programme had given guidance.

3. Follow-up audio-cassettes. Using audio-cassettes to follow-up television case-studies is a third approach which has been used by some Open University courses. Here students listen to the cassette immediately after viewing the case-study. These cassettes can include a wide range of material which tries to help students begin their analysis of the case-study. For example one follow-up cassette included additional material recorded just after the filming for the case-study had been completed. In this material several people who had appeared in the case-study commented on their reactions to the situation which the case-study had depicted. Using these comments, and a few brief extracts from the soundtrack of the case-study the academic was able to focus students' attention on several aspects of the case-study which he felt were problematic and deserved further thought. This use of audiocassettes has proved very successful in some courses but it still does not tackle the fundamental question of whether a more appropriate structure could be found for these television case-studies which would reduce the need for these supplementary materials.

4. Training packages. These first three attempts to help students were all incorporated into the particular course for which the case-studies had been produced. However, a fourth approach tries to help students make better use of Open University television programmes in general;

including case-studies. A videocassette with extracts from a range of Open University programmes, together with an accompanying handbook, was produced by members of the BBC-Open University Production Department, the University's Institute of Educational Technology, and Regional Tutorial Services. These materials have been described in more detail by Durbridge (1981) but their basic format is that after viewing a particular extract students then work through a specially prepared exercise. In the exercises based on case-study programmes students are given help in relating the case-study to passages taken from the correspondence text. This emphasises the need to view critically; questionning the assumptions behind what people say, and analysing the situations shown.

5. Re-structuring the case-study programmes. All four approaches outlined above have been found to be quite successful in helping students to make better use of television case-studies but a more fundamental solution lies in rethinking the way television case-studies are structured. Perhaps it would be possible to structure these programmes so that the help for the student is included in the basic structure of the programme. Supplementary broadcast notes and follow-up audiocassettes might still have a role but the major effort at helping students would be within each case-study. This is the fifth approach and can be seen in some recent Open University case-studies which have used several of the electronic techniques now available to the television producer to prompt students into interrogating the material in the programme. For example, some programmes have frozen the action while students are reminded of the concept and asked whether it works as an explanatory device in that

case. Following this part of the sequence may even be shown again to reinforce the questionning, but however this critical viewing is promoted the interventions have to be carefully designed to allow the students to reach their own conclusions. It would be a sad irony if these interventions merely pushed students even more firmly into accepting the programme maker's construction of reality.

At several points in this paper it has been suggested that a better solution to the problem of how to help students make better use of television case-studies lies in restructuring the case-studies themselves - rather than producing better support materials or separate training packages. Some support for this argument can be found in the research reported by Bates and Gallagher (1977, p.16) where they found that many students experienced difficulties working through the support materials in the intended sequence. Students' study patterns cannot always accommodate to the fixed transmission schedule of Open University television broadcasts. However, if this was the only justification for suggesting a change in the structure of television case-studies it would be inadequate. The problem could be seen as mainly one of 'logistics' - how to deliver the course materials to students in the optimum sequence. Videocassette recordings of the case-studies, or multiple transmissions, could provide solutions without requiring any change in the case studies themselves. I believe this would only be a partial solution of the problem. This belief is based on a conviction that we should not think of television case-studies as simply documentary programmes for a specialised audience. We need to recognise that these case-studies are as much a construction of reality as conventional documentaries and that if the basis of their

construction is hidden there is a danger that their special educational objectives may not be achieved by most students.

To understand the reasoning behind this argument we must begin to think of television as a "meaningful discourse" (Hall, 1980) which has been encoded by the programme makers and must be decoded by the viewers if any communication is to occur. In relation to television case-studies the most important aspect of this conceptualisation is that the "meaning structures" used by the programme makers to encode the material will probably not be congruent with those used by the students to decode it. In consequence the students may 'misinterpret' the meaning of the material and not be involved in the learning experience intended by the programme makers. The following section considers this argument in more detail.

Case-studies as a Construction of Reality

All television case-studies are only a construction of reality. Material is selected, condensed, and structured into a coherent whole which appears to reflect reality. Hall (1974, p.23) reminds us that this process involves the explanatory frameworks employed by the programme maker.

> "Television cannot capture the whole of any event: the idea that it offers a pure transcription of reality, a neutrality of the camera before the facts, is an illusion, a utopia. All filmed accounts of reality are selective. All edited or manipulated symbolic reality is impregnated with values, viewpoints, implicit theorizings, common sense assumptions."

With a case-study programme produced as part of a higher education course one of the explanatory frameworks behind that particular construction

of reality will be the academic perspective which the programme makers have adopted to analyse that case. We can all imagine the range of case-studies different economists could produce about unemployment even if they were all sent to film the same cases - but other forces are also acting to shape the way that construction of reality will appear.

> "A 'raw' historical event cannot, in that form, be transmitted by say, a television newscast. Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the television discourse. In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse it is subject to all the complex formal 'rules' by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event."
>
> (Hall, 1980, p. 129)

So the meanings and messages contained in the encoded reality of a television case-study are shaped by a complex set of explanatory frameworks which all those involved in the production process bring with them. First, there is the academic perspective with which the case is being interpreted; together with accompanying judgements by the faculty members involved of what constitutes an 'academically respectable' presentation of the case. Second, there is the whole complex of beliefs among the television production team of what makes for 'good' television. In the wider context of television news Hall (1980, p. 136) has called this the professional metacode and points out that it tends to "..... foreground such apparently neutral-technical questions as visual quality, 'professionalism' and so on." Gallagher (1978) has drawn our attention to the situations where this professional metacode can conflict with attempts to restructure television case-studies. The third explanatory framework involved in the encoding process is the shared ".... stock of social knowledge" which we use in our everyday lives to make sense of the world around us. These generally accepted social meanings are

particularly important in general service television if the programme is to produce a message which the viewer will decode in the way the producer intends.

> "The broadcaster must assume this knowledge in the audience, and the audience will have to have it, to make sense of what is shown and heard. Meaning depends on the shared frameworks, shared codes, shared knowledge-in-use, shared interpretive frameworks between communicator and receiver. Otherwise information will not pass from A to B - and there will be no circuit. If A 'encodes' then B (the audience) must 'decode'. Each is a social practice. Both depend on a massive background of shared assumptions."
> (Hall, 1981, p. 277)

In the special context of a television case-study the students will probably share this background knowledge - though they may not if their cultural backgrounds differ widely from those of the programme makers. Students will certainly bring with them strong views about what constitutes 'good' television, but Morgan (1978, p.3) warns us that we should not leap to the conclusion that students judge instructional television by a simplistic application of the criteria they use to judge general service television.

> "....they do not expect an OU programme to be like a general service documentary any more than they would expect it to be like a course unit or the chapter of a set book or a tutorial. Rather they would expect it to use different forms and conventions to organise and express its ideas."

The explanatory framework which <u>most</u> students do <u>not</u> share with those who encoded the programme material is a detailed understanding of the academic perspective on which that construction of reality was based. It is therefore possible that the students will 'misinterpret' the messages in the encoded material of the case-study because they decode them using <u>only</u> the generally accepted interpretive framework of generally held

social meanings. With many television case-studies our main purpose is to prompt students into going beyond the 'common-sense', generally accepted explanations and to view 'reality' in new and more complex ways. If students fail to do this a major educational objective of the television case-study will not have been achieved.

Thompson (1979, p. 169) argues that the apparent realism of a television case-study tends to increase the likelihood that students will not view 'reality' in new ways.

> "It engenders an unconscious relaxation because it is familiar. It does not distance one from anything but in fact encourages the reverse, an emotional, accepting type of response which tends to 'put students to sleep' intellectually ... She/he is hardly constituted as 'student' at all, but is merely confirmed as general 'observer/viewer.'"

The results of an evaluation of one Open University television case-study reported by Gallagher (1977; 1978) tend to support this conclusion. The programme explored inequalities between the sexes by looking at the problems of women working outside the home. It was the first programme in the course and originally conceived as primarily involving and motivational. However, as the programme was being edited it became clear that the material provided excellent illustrations of most of the main concepts dealt with by the course. The educational purpose of the programme was therefore changed. It was now seen as a resource against which students could apply these major concepts. Unfortunately only about one-sixth of the students were able to use the material in this way. Gallagher (1978, p.205) suggests two reasons why this was so. Partly it was that most of the students " ...lacked the analytical and integrative skills which would have enabled them to use the programme material as a source of evidence." However,

Gallagher believes that the late change in the educational purpose of the programme had been a more significant factor. The programme had originally been conceived as motivating and involving and had succeeded in that purpose. The additional educational objectives were added too late in the production process.

Clearly there is a danger that unless the viewers are helped into the role of students they may remain as observers interpreting the material using the 'common-sense', generally accepted explanations. The result may be anger, concern, interest, involvement, or motivation, but if our educational purpose is more complex - if we want them to view reality in new ways - we must rethink the way we structure television case-studies. By thinking of these programmes as encoded reality which the student must decode we can hypothesise that the reason why students remain as general observer/viewer and (as Thompson suggests) are not distanced from anything is that in the absence of an adequate understanding of the special academic explanatory framework they are forced to decode the material using the interpretive framework of the generally accepted social meanings of the images they see. It is probably fair to characterise the student response as "emotional" and "accepting" but it is unfair to blame the students. The failure lies with those who made the case-study and assumed that the students shared all the explanatory frameworks which were used to encode the material. Unless it can be assumed that students are very familiar with the concepts which form the academic perspective being used it is crucial that students should be given help in applying those concepts throughout the programme. Thompson suggests

that this help should be given by interrupting the case-study programme more often (1979, p. 170).

> "The knowledge producing process associated with the transformation of experiences and the 'real world' requires the intervention of concepts, and it is precisely the function of teaching to 'carry' this intervention."

Unfortunately, this desire to restructure case-study programmes by interrupting them more often may sometimes conflict with generally accepted views among the programme makers of what constitutes 'good' television. The flow of a general service documentary would probably never be interrupted as frequently as we are calling for in case-study programmes. But, as was said earlier, we must stop thinking of television case-studies as just documentaries for a specialised audience.

Conclusions

It is important that throughout the production of a television case-study all those involved should be clear about the learning process they want the students to experience. Later it is equally important that these objectives should be revealed to the students.

If students are to achieve the objectives and make full use of television case-studies we need to pay careful attention to the structure of these programmes. They should not be seen as simply documentaries for a specialised audience. More of the explanatory frameworks on which that version of reality was constructed should be revealed to the students. It might even sometimes be valuable to demonstrate to students that different

interpretive frameworks produce different versions of the same 'reality'. In these ways the students will see that the television case-study is only one construction and perhaps feel freer to question it.

Students also need help within the programme if they are to adopt the role of student rather than just viewer/observer. Unless we do this there is a danger that the response to television case-studies will be an emotional, accepting type of response. We must help students to distance themselves from the material, perhaps by interrupting case-studies more frequently, to ensure that they decode the material using more than simply the generally accepted interpretive frameworks.

Television case-studies can be a particularly valuable learning resource and an excellent use of television; providing learning experiences which it may be impossible to give the independent learner in any other way. With the increasing availability of video replay equipment - videocassettes and videodiscs - the ease with which the independent learner can make use of television case-studies must increase. The need now is to develop the way these case-studies are structured.

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APPENDIX

INSTRUCTIONAL MEDIA AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Open University was set up to provide an opportunity of higher education for adults who were unable to go to University when they left school. Although students must normally be at least 21 years old, and resident in the United Kingdon, the University demands no other entry qualifications. The Open University now has over 60,000 undergraduate students, and approximately 25,000 non-credit students.

The Open University's Teaching System

Students are mostly in full-time employment and study at home using a combination of specially written correspondence texts, set books, and radio and television programmes. Throughout the course optional face to face tuition is available at one of the 260 local study centres spread around the country, but a student's main source of personal tuition is by correspondence. Some courses have a compulsory, residential summer school lasting one week. These are held on the campuses of conventional universities when the students of those host institutions have left for their summer vacations. At the end of each course every student must take a three hour written examination at a specially designated examination centre.

The Open University's headquarters are at Walton Hall, 50 miles north of London in the new city of Milton Keynes. Here new courses are

designed by course teams which include academic staff. BBC producers, educational technologists, and a back up team of graphic artists, editors, photographers and librarians.

A formal agreement between the Open University and the BBC provides for the production of up to 300 new television, and 300 new radio programmes each year. This agreement also includes transmission time for the growing number of Open University programmes. In 1980 the BBC transmitted each week just over 35 hours of television and approximately 24 hours of radio for the Open University.

The Open University's commitment to broadcasting is therefore considerable. The total expenditure of the Open University in 1980 was approximately £50 million of which just over £8 million was paid to the BBC for producing and transmitting the television and radio programmes.

Despite the major commitment it must be remembered that broadcasting only plays a part - though sometimes a very important one - in a complex multi-media distance learning system. Even on those courses which use the maximum allocation of radio and television programmes students receive only one 25 minute television programme and one 20 minute radio programme per week. Many courses use far less broadcast time than this and recently one or two courses have been produced with no radio or television component. However, despite the comparatively small proportion of a student's time devoted to braodcasts they are an important element in the Open University's teaching system.

The Role of Television

It would be probably fair to say that the initial decision to use broadcast television as part of the Open University's teaching system owed as much to politics and pragmatism as to pedagogy. The original political vision of a university of the air had carried over into the early planning for the Open University and the need to deliver material to large numbers of students working in their own homes meant that the national transmission network of the BBC could not be ignored.

Many of the early television programmes were rather like illustrated lectures but gradually other programme formats were adopted. Most of these were developments of formats used in general service broadcasting. So documentary programmes became popular in some faculties and today there seems to be a growing interest in the use of actors to dramatise material. But whatever trends are evident a few hours spent comparing programmes produced in the first few years of the Open University with those being produced now will show a tremendous increase in the sophistication of the production techniques employed.